



EXTERNAL OTITIS

WHAT IS "SWIMMER'S EAR" OR ACUTE EXTERNAL OTITIS?

External otitis or "swimmer's ear" is a skin infection of the skin covering the outer ear canal. It is really a dermatological condition that can either be acute or chronic. Acute external otitis is commonly a bacterial infection caused by streptococcus, staphylococcus, or Pseudomonas. Swimmer's ear is usually caused by excessive water exposure. When water pools in the ear canal (frequently trapped by wax), the skin will become soggy serving as an inviting culture media for bacteria.

The first sign of infection is that the ear will feel full and it may itch. Next the ear canal will swell and ear drainage will follow. At this stage the ear will be very painful, especially with movement of the external cartilage. The ear canal can swell shut, and the side of the face can become swollen. Next the glands of the neck may enlarge, and it can become more difficult to open the jaw.

WHAT IS CHRONIC EXTERNAL OTITIS?

Chronic external otitis can be caused by a bacterial infection, a skin condition (eczema or seborrhea), fungus (Aspergillosis), chronic irritation (hearing aids, Q-tips), allergy, chronic drainage from middle ear disease, tumors (rare), or it may simply follow from a nervous habit of scratching the ear. In most patients, more than one factor may be involved. For example, a patient with eczema may subsequently develop black ear drainage. This would be suggestive of an accompanying fungus. The standard treatments and preventative measures, as noted below, are often all that is needed to treat even a chronic otitis externa. However, if you are diabetic or immune suppressed, chronic external otitis can be a sign of a serious underlying disease (malignant external otitis). Malignant external otitis is a misnomer because it is not a tumor or a cancer, but rather an aggressive bacterial (Pseudomonas) infection of the base of the skull. If the standard therapy for a chronic external otitis does not succeed, or if you are diabetic or immune suppressed, please consult an ear specialist.

HOW DO YOU TREAT EXTERNAL OTITIS?

Regardless of the cause, moisture and irritation will prolong the course of the problem. For this reason, the ear should be kept dry. While showering or swimming, use an ear plug (one that is designed to keep water out), or use cotton with Vaseline on the outside.

You should avoid scratching your ears or using Q-tips. This will only aggravate the skin, and in most situations will make the condition worse. Itching the ears will just make the ears itch more, and any medications prescribed will be ineffective. If you use a hearing aid, leave it out as much as possible until swelling and discharge stops.

Your doctor will likely prescribe antibiotic ear drops (Cortisporin, Volsol, Cipro) with or without an oral antibiotic. If you develop a skin rash after using the ear drops, discontinue them immediately and call your doctor. These should be used as directed.

In some situations, a “wick” will need to be placed in the ear canal to stent it open and serve as a conduit for the ear drops. Periodic, and sometimes frequent, suctioning of the ear canal helps to keep it open, remove debris, and decrease bacterial counts.

HOW CAN EXTERNAL OTITIS BE PREVENTED?

1. Decrease exposure to water. If you are prone to infections it is advisable that you use an ear plug when you bathe or swim. Alcohol drops (Swim Ear) used in the ear after water exposure followed by drying the ear with a hair dryer held at arms length will often help keep the ear free of moisture.
2. Do not instrument, scratch, or use Q-tips in the ears.
3. Try to keep the ear free of wax. This may require maintenance type visits to the doctor to have your ears cleaned, or if your ear will tolerate it, use some of the over-the-counter wax removers.
4. If you already have an ear infection, or if you have a hole in your eardrum, or if you have ever had ear surgery or ear tubes, first consult your doctor prior to swimming and before you use any type of ear drop. You can make your own ear drops by using rubbing alcohol. It causes the evaporation of water from the ear, which helps to dry out the ear, and it may even kill some bacteria and funguses that cause swimmer’s ear. White vinegar, which is acetic acid, can be added to the alcohol (50:50). It lowers the pH of the ear canal, and is also effective at killing bacteria.
5. If you suffer from dry crusty skin, mineral oil ear drops can be used to protect the ear from water.

WHY DO EARS ITCH?

Itchy ears can drive a person crazy. It can be the first sign of an infection, but if the problem is chronic, it is more likely caused by a chronic dermatitis of the ear canal. Seborrheic dermatitis and eczema can both affect the ear canal. There is really no cure for this problem, but it can be made tolerable with the use of steroid drops and creams. People with these problems are more prone to acute infectious exacerbations. Use of ear plugs, alcohol drops, and non-instrumentation of the ear is the best prevention for infection. Other allergy type treatments may also help itchy ears.

WHAT IF I GET A FOREIGN OBJECT OR INSECT IN MY EAR?

Foreign objects are frequently placed in the ear by young children or occur accidentally while trying to clean or scratch the ear. Frequently there is an accompanying external ear infection. Removal of any object from the ear can be very difficult, and should only be attempted by a physician skilled in the techniques of safe removal. Usually this can be done in the office, but sometimes general anesthesia must be used in cases where the object is lodged too deeply in the ear or if the patient is uncooperative. It is important to remember that the most common reason an ear is injured from a foreign object is because of inadvertent damage occurring during removal of the object. For this reason, do not try to removal the object yourself.

Insects or bugs may also become trapped in the ear. Small gnats may become caught in the wax and cannot fly out. They can often be washed out with warm water. Larger insects or bugs may not be able to turn around in the narrow canal. If the insect or bugs is still alive, first kill it by filling the ear with mineral oil. This will suffocate the insect, then see your doctor to have it removed.

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